

From the Visible to the Symbolic: Costume as Emotional Narrative in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*

De lo visible a lo simbólico: el vestuario como relato emocional en *Volver* de Pedro Almodóvar

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Abstract:

This study examines costume as a narrative element in Pedro Almodóvar's film *Volver* (2006), emphasizing its role in depicting the emotional and cultural nuances of the main characters. Through a semiotic and narrative perspective, the research explores how costumes function as a visual language, conveying internal tensions, emotional states, and cultural dimensions. In the context of mise-en-scène, costume design goes beyond mere decoration; it incorporates factors such as historical context, characters' affective relationships, their psychological traits, and the messages they convey. Particular attention is given to Raimunda's clothing, which illustrates various emotional facets, including her strength, vulnerability, and resilience. Similarly, the study addresses the costumes of other central characters, such as Agustina and Irene, demonstrating how their clothing subtly communicates diverse aspects of their personalities and personal contexts. This analysis highlights that in *Volver*, costumes serve as an essential symbolic code that enhances the narrative, reinforcing both the emotional depth and the cultural references integral to Almodóvar's cinematic style.

Resumen:

Este estudio analiza el vestuario como recurso narrativo en la película *Volver* (2006) de Pedro Almodóvar, destacando su papel en la representación de los matices emocionales y culturales de los personajes principales. Desde una perspectiva semiótica y narrativa, se explora cómo el vestuario se configura como un lenguaje visual que transmite emociones, tensiones internas y aspectos culturales específicos. En el ámbito de la puesta en escena, el diseño de vestuario no se limita a una función decorativa; por el contrario, integra factores como el contexto histórico, las relaciones afectivas de los personajes, sus características psicológicas y el mensaje que articulan. Particularmente, se analiza la indumentaria de Raimunda, cuya ropa expresa múltiples facetas emocionales relacionadas con su fortaleza, vulnerabilidad y resiliencia. De igual forma, el estudio aborda las prendas de otros personajes centrales, como Agustina e Irene, resaltando cómo su vestuario comunica sutilmente diferentes aspectos de sus personalidades y contextos vitales. Este análisis subraya que, en *Volver*, la ropa actúa como un código simbólico esencial que enriquece la narrativa, fortaleciendo tanto la dimensión emocional de la historia como su vínculo con diversas referencias culturales presentes en el cine de Almodóvar.

Keywords: Pedro Almodóvar; *Volver*; Costume; Film Analysis; Semiotics.

Palabras clave: Pedro Almodóvar; *Volver*; vestuario; análisis fílmico; semiótica.

1. 1. Introduction

Cinema shapes its language through a synergy between visual and narrative elements, where costume design transcends its aesthetic function to become an essential semiotic system. As Roland Barthes observed in his studies on fashion (1967/2022), clothing operates as a “dressed sign” that encodes identities and social contexts. This premise acquires relevance in the filmography of Pedro Almodóvar, a director whose visual universe is constructed through a deliberate aesthetic in which costume serves as a dramatic extension of his characters.

From *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) to *La habitación de al lado* (2024), the filmmaker has developed a recognizable style that fuses kitsch, pop, melodrama, and a hyperbolic color palette. Christian Metz (1974) would emphasize how such an approach turns costume into a “signifying syntagm”: in films like *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988), crimson outfits and exaggerated silhouettes not only define psychological profiles but also articulate narrative conflicts. However, it is in *Volver* (2006) that this code reaches its most refined symbolic expression.

The film—situated at a moment of creative maturity following *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) and *Hable con ella* (2002)—synthesizes the director’s recurring themes: female resilience, transgenerational secrets, and the vindication of rural Spain. As Paul Julian Smith (2014) notes, the film operates as both a geographical and emotional return to La Mancha, Almodóvar’s birthplace, where a predominantly female cast (Penélope Cruz, Carmen Maura, Lola Dueñas, Yohana Cobo) embodies a matriarchy that endures amidst both literal and metaphorical ghosts.

Within this framework, costume design surpasses its decorative role. In contrast to the urban exuberance of *Tacones lejanos* (1991) or *La piel que habito* (2011), *Volver* unfolds between two distinct settings: the urban and the rural. These environments host both rustic and metropolitan garments, featuring a chromatic palette that oscillates between vivid and subdued tones, evoking the visual and cultural identity of La Mancha.

Within this aesthetic construction, the character of Raimunda—portrayed by Cruz—condenses multiple visual meanings. Her wardrobe also traces a narrative transformation: from less revealing cuts and darker colours that conceal a sexualized body to more pronounced necklines and vibrant hues that assert her agency, materializing what Vladimir Propp (1928) would define as a “transformational function” within the dramatic arc.

2. Objectives and Hypotheses

This study is grounded in Roland Barthes's premise (1967/2022), which conceptualizes fashion not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon but as a system of signification that conveys cultural, social, and psychological values. From this perspective, the analysis of costume design in *Volver* focuses on its narrative dimension, treating it as a visually encoded system capable of expressing emotions, tensions, and internal transformations. Clothing, understood here as a “dressed language,” allows each garment to be interpreted as a sign actively contributing to the construction of meaning within the narrative.

Building on this theoretical framework, the research is structured around three specific objectives. First, it aims to examine the relationship between costume, representation, and emotion, considering the expressive potential of garments as narrative devices loaded with affective symbolism. To this end, the study draws on Vladimir Propp's actantial model, whose functional structure enables the interpretation of certain objects as “magical objects” (Propp, 1928/1971, pp. 39–44)—that is, elements that, beyond their practical utility, embody intimate values and establish connections between characters and their emotional worlds.

Second, the research seeks to analyse the cultural dimension of costume through a semiotic lens, which conceives of clothing as a system of signs. This analysis draws from Barthes's reflections on how dress discourse articulates social and historical meanings (Barthes, 1967/2022, pp. 10–13), and is enriched by Anne Hollander's contributions, which emphasize the role of clothing in the visual shaping of the body and its inscription within specific historical contexts (Hollander, 1993, pp. 154–160). Within this framework, the study compares the

predominantly rural iconography in *Volver*—earth tones, traditional motifs—with the more urban and sophisticated aesthetics found in earlier Almodóvar films such as *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (1988). This contrast not only reveals a stylistic inflection but also articulates an ideological stance on female identity and cultural memory.

The third objective is to determine the autonomous role of costume as a form of visual language integrated into the filmic narrative. In this regard, the study draws upon Giuliana Bruno's insights, which conceptualize costume in cinema as a sensitive surface—an affective membrane that links body, space, and the spectator's gaze (Bruno, 2002, pp. 118–123). From this standpoint, the research analyses how costume choices in *Volver* actively participate in storytelling, conveying emotions and internal transformations without relying on dialogue, while reinforcing key thematic concerns such as motherhood, grief, trauma, and reconciliation.

Thus, the study aims to explore the function of costume in *Volver*, with the goal of understanding how it operates as an autonomous visual language imbued with meaning, capable of articulating discourses on female identity, emotion, and collective memory beyond the scope of verbal expression. The central research question—In what ways does costume function as a signifying system in the narrative construction of Almodóvar's *Volver*?—seeks to unveil the expressive potential of costume as a symbolic axis in shaping affective experiences and the personal trajectories of female characters.

Accordingly, the hypothesis posits that Almodóvar's cinema deploys a visual framework in which costume transcends its ornamental function to assume a fundamental narrative role. In *Volver*, garments not only reflect emotional states or social conditions; they also function as symbolic vehicles that actively contribute to the construction of meaning related to grief, motherhood, guilt, or redemption. Following Propp, certain textile objects acquire the status of “magical objects” by condensing symbolic values that can alter the narrative course (Propp, 1928/1971, pp. 39–44). For his part, Barthes argues that the system of dress constitutes a structured discourse that conveys cultural and social conventions (Barthes, 1967/2022, pp. 10–13)—an idea manifested in the contrast between *Volver*'s rural aesthetic and the more cosmopolitan image of

the director's previous works. Raimunda's evolving wardrobe—from dark, muted tones that obscure her sexualized body to vibrant colours and revealing cuts that assert her agency—can be interpreted as a visual expression of her internal journey of resistance, transformation, and emotional reconstruction. Finally, in line with Giuliana Bruno's notion of costume as an “affective membrane,” cinematic attire is understood as a device that mediates between body, space, and viewer (Bruno, 2002, pp. 118–123). In this sense, clothing does not merely dress—it communicates, inscribes affect, and shape's identity. Altogether, costume in *Volver* emerges as a visual language rich in latent meaning, complementing, intensifying, and amplifying the film's verbal dimension.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Semiotics and Film Narrative

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that combines semiotic analysis, critical bibliographic review, and case study methodology, with the aim of examining the costume design in *Volver* as a narrative and symbolic resource that transcends its aesthetic dimension. From Roland Barthes's perspective, clothing can be interpreted as a system of signs that, within the cinematic realm, reveals essential aspects of both plot and character. Barthes conceptualizes it as a “signifying writing,” in which individual units encode social, cultural, and emotional discourses (Barthes, 1967/2022, p. 45). This notion is further developed in *Camera Lucida*, where clothing is presented as a bearer of the punctum, a visual detail imbued with affect and personal meaning (Barthes, 1987, p. 57). From this viewpoint, costume becomes integrated into the film narrative as a structural element of storytelling.

To apply these concepts, an analysis was conducted on thirty key stills from the film. The selection criteria were based on two main axes: (1) their narrative value—scenes that mark turning points in the characters' dramatic arcs or significant revelations—and (2) their visual density, in terms of colour, texture, silhouette, and accessories. A paradigmatic example is the recurrent presence of the colour red in Raimunda's wardrobe, which functions as a signifier of desire, vitality, danger, and pain, in alignment with the symbolic interpretations of

colour proposed by Sylvia Molloy (2018, pp. 93–95). Particular attention was also given to scenes in which costume articulates a relationship between characters and their cultural environment, especially regarding traditions from the La Mancha region. In these cases, clothing establishes a connection between the feminine domestic sphere and the symbolic space of the village, reinforcing the film's cultural enunciation (Martín-Barbero, 2009, p. 121).

The analytical procedure involved the systematic coding of visual costume elements—colour, form, style, and accessories—enabling a correlation between changes in attire and the narrative arcs of Raimunda and Irene and establishing links between visual transformations and narrative progression.

As shown in Table (F1), each still was analysed according to narrative criteria and visual symbolism. The analysis was supported by a descriptive framework that systematizes information for each still, including the corresponding scene, the applied narrative criterion, the coded visual elements, and the interpreted symbolism. For example:

Frame	Scene	Narrative Criterion	Coded Elements	Identified Symbolism
1	Cleansing of the tomb	Emotional transformation	Floral headscarf, earth-toned palette	Memory, connection to roots
2	Raimunda at the restaurant	Narrative pivot	Red apron, defined silhouette	Empowerment, resilience
3	Irene reemerges from the past	Central conflict	Grey-blue dress, diaphanous texture	Life/death duality, enigma

F1. Semiotic Analysis of Key Scenes in *Volver* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2006). Source: Author's work.

Furthermore, kitsch elements integrated into the mise-en-scène were identified, functioning as markers of re-signified cultural identity. Following Evans (1999, p. 27), Almodóvar's use of kitsch does not merely serve a decorative purpose but rather operates as a visual code that articulates a form of resistance to canonical narrative models.

Finally, this study draws on the work of scholars such as Stella Bruzzi (1997, pp. 35–38), who analyses film costume as a discursive and narrative component, and Costa (2009, p. 142), who emphasizes its role in generating emotional atmosphere in contemporary cinema. These approaches reinforce the idea that costume in *Volver* not only represents the characters but also embodies their memory, desire, and narrative positioning.

To complement the theoretical analysis, an additional source of reference was an interview with *Volver*'s costume designer Bina Daigeler, published in the podcast of *El País* digital edition (Ferrero & Megía, April 14, 2021). This conversation provided insight into creative decision-making from a professional practice perspective, offering direct information about the aesthetic and narrative criteria that guided the costume design. Taken together, this interview allowed for an integration of theoretical perspectives with design practice, reinforcing the notion that costume in *Volver* operates as a narrative device of high symbolic density—capable of condensing emotion, identity, and dramatic structure into each representative garment.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Fundamental Theories of Audiovisual Narrative

The analysis of costume in *Volver* is grounded in a theoretical articulation that combines semiotics, narrative theory, and film studies. Roland Barthes provides an essential foundation by conceptualizing each garment as a sign operating on both denotative and connotative levels, thereby allowing costume to communicate meanings beyond its immediate functional purpose.

Christian Metz expands on this perspective by conceiving cinema as an audiovisual language structured through signs, wherein image and sound combine to generate meaning. In *The Imaginary Signifier*, he argues that “cinema is indeed a language, though not a language system,” and that its semiotic potential lies in the specific articulation of visual and auditory codes that are actualized in each shot (Metz, 1977, pp. 15–18). Within this framework, costume emerges as a visual sign imbued with narrative intentionality, embedded in the signifying logic of audiovisual montage.

Although Vladimir Propp's focus was on Russian folktales, his functional model offers a useful tool for identifying recurring roles and actions within narrative structure—such as those of the hero, donor, or aggressor. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp demonstrates that characters are not defined by psychological depth but by the functions they fulfill in the development of the narrative (Propp, 1971, pp. 20–22). These functions are visually expressed and intensified through costume, which acts as a symbolic reinforcement of archetypes and dramatic roles, thereby facilitating their recognition by the audience.

This analysis is further enriched by Seymour Chatman's contribution, particularly his distinction between “story” —the chain of events and characters— and “discourse” —the manner in which those events are presented—, establishing a key differentiation between narrative content (what) and its mode of presentation (how) (Chatman, 2014, pp. 31–33). This distinction allows costume to be understood not only as a referential element within the diegetic universe, but also as a discursive strategy that shapes the viewer's perception and contributes to the film's narrative enunciation.

As Chatman explains, narrative discourse constitutes a structure with intrinsic value, capable of conveying meanings beyond the story's content (Chatman, 2014, p. 45). Consequently, costume can be regarded as an active component of that discursive structure. Furthermore, in addressing the constraints of the cinematic medium, Chatman underscores that film cannot avoid representing visual details such as clothing, since visual representation is intrinsic to its language: “cinema (...) must represent visual details with great precision” (Chatman, 2014, p. 61). From this perspective, costume not only expresses character traits but also functions as a discursive operator that condenses temporal, social, and emotional information, thereby contributing to the intelligibility and affective dimension of audiovisual storytelling.

4.2 Specific Studies on the Work of Pedro Almodóvar

Pedro Almodóvar's filmography constitutes a visual and narrative universe where artifice, kitsch, and emotion are articulated as forms of cultural resistance. As Sánchez-Arce (2020, p. 48) points out, his cinema merges the surreal, the kitsch, and the naturalistic within a singular aesthetic that

challenges the formal and thematic conventions of traditional Spanish cinema. In *Volver*, these elements converge in a highly codified mise-en-scène, where costume functions as a discursive vector that communicates not only character or context, but also memory, desire, and identity (Sánchez-Arce, 2020, pp. 77–78).

Paul Julian Smith emphasizes that visual excess—particularly in colour and costume—does not operate merely as ornamentation, but rather as a language that articulates both intimate and political transformations. As he asserts, “costume in his cinema is never merely decorative; it is a language in itself that articulates both personal and political transformations” (Smith, 2014, p. 112). This view aligns with the theories of Roland Barthes and Stella Bruzzi, previously discussed, regarding costume as meaningful writing and as a discursive surface inscribed with affect, memory, and ideology.

Similarly, Mark Allinson observes that gender identity in Almodóvar’s work is consistently problematized through a self-reflexive use of visual codes: “gender identity in Almodóvar is consciously problematized through the continual exposure of its mechanisms” (Allinson, 2001, p. 92). Costume, in this regard, plays an active role in the deconstruction of stereotypes by functioning as a sign that refers both to tradition and its subversion. In *Volver*, this strategy is evident in the use of attire that combines popular references from La Mancha with elements of urban sophistication, emphasizing tensions between rootedness and identity reinvention.

Stella Bruzzi offers a key interpretive perspective by arguing that female costume in Almodóvar’s films not only embellishes the body but transforms it into a surface of spectacle and resistance. “The flamboyant costumes in his films are not merely aesthetic choices but narrative devices that question traditional gender roles and social expectations” (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 89). This perspective reinforces the understanding of costume as a sign with structural narrative function, a notion also developed by Seymour Chatman in his distinction between “story” and “discourse” as differentiated levels of cinematic narration (Chatman, 2014, pp. 31–33).

Almodóvar himself has highlighted the significance he attributes to objects and costumes in his films. In *Almodóvar on Almodóvar*, he states: “objects and furnishings contribute greatly to the strength of your settings,” and he notes that some are designed specifically to convey a particular symbolic charge (Strauss, 2006, p. 85). This meticulous attention to visual signs reaffirms the auteurist nature of his cinema, in which artifice becomes a form of emotional truth.

From his early works such as *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980) to more recent productions like *La habitación de al lado* (2024), Almodóvar has cultivated a style in which the melodramatic, the autobiographical, and the performative are intertwined to challenge social and aesthetic norms. As Acevedo-Muñoz affirms, the filmmaker employs memory, the body, and identity to interrogate post-Franco Spanish culture from a transgressive perspective, without abandoning affective dimensions (2019, pp. 84–85). This combination of political engagement and visual stylization situates Almodóvar within a tradition that blurs the boundaries between marginality and centrality, between the intimate and the collective.

Paradigmatic examples of this aesthetic can be found in *Laberinto de pasiones* (1982), where Sexi's costume—a black leather suit with attached plastic breasts—symbolizes a radical rupture with conventional codes of femininity, and in *Matador* (1986), which incorporates contemporary Spanish fashion designers such as Sybilla and Ágatha Ruiz de la Prada to construct a reinvented national aesthetic (Dapena, 2013, p. 507). These choices clearly reflect a conscious engagement with visuality as a site of symbolic contestation.

Finally, as Allinson notes, Almodóvar reinterprets traditional Spanish culture with irony, yet without falling into pastiche or cynicism (2001, p. 16). On the contrary, his cinema offers an affective and critical rereading of cultural signs, where costume acts as a catalyst of meaning, emotion, and memory. “If there is one genre that demands artifice and elaboration, it is melodrama,” the director himself asserts (Strauss, 2007, p. 85), thereby underscoring his commitment to a poetics of controlled excess that turns style into a tool of narrative reflection.

4.3 Costume as Narrative Discourse

From an integrative perspective, costume can be understood as a moving text that actively participates in audiovisual storytelling. Pamela Church Gibson (2012, pp. 15–190) emphasizes how clothing extends and amplifies bodily performance, allowing the body to act as a signifying surface. This idea is complemented by the analysis of Cruz Pérez, who argues that “cinematic costume not only defines the character, but also establishes a dialogue between cinema and fashion, contributing to the visual and symbolic construction of the audiovisual narrative” (Cruz Pérez, 2024, p. 81). In this sense, costume design operates as a system of signs that communicates identity, desire, memory, and transformation.

This reading is further enriched by Cruz Pérez’s discussion of traditional garments as cultural markers that evoke collective memory and play a key role in constructing local identities. Costume, in this regard, not only accompanies action but also defines it, inscribing itself within a dual dimension: as an expression of individuality and as a vehicle for shared cultural meanings.

This approach is supported by the work of José Patricio Pérez-Rufí (2018), who contends that costume functions as an essential element within cinematic narrative. According to Pérez-Rufí, costume operates as a character-building device that is subordinated to the dramatic needs of the story, thus acquiring a distinctly functional character (p. 554). Furthermore, the author explains that in classical Hollywood cinema, all *mise-en-scène* resources—including costume design—are deliberately employed to reinforce the narrative structure. This perspective reinforces the notion that clothing is not merely decorative but contributes to character construction and conveys essential information to the viewer.

Gerard Dapena points out that Almodóvar can be regarded, without exaggeration, as the most fashion-conscious European director of his generation, since the textures and colours of fabrics play a fundamental role in the visual design of his films, and certain garments occasionally acquire significant narrative value. This relationship with fashion transcends the ornamental and becomes integral to character development and visual

storytelling. A detailed analysis of costume and design in his films reveals a tension between the invisibility and visibility of attire: while clothing generally serves utilitarian purposes—communicating personality traits or socioeconomic status—at key moments it acquires such a strong visual presence that it operates on a higher semiotic level (Dapena, 2013, p. 505).

As Ismael Amaro Martos notes, “the team surrounding Pedro Almodóvar’s cinema functions as a Factory—reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s famed Factory—where all members contribute to the foundations of Almodóvar’s cinematic universe” (Amaro Martos, 2018, p. 74). This creative environment includes costume designers whose influence goes beyond ornamentation to become an essential part of the director’s visual language. Amaro Martos refers to emblematic examples such as Fabio in *Labyrinth of Passion* (1982), whose costume—consisting of a T-shirt spray-painted by Tino Casal and a jacket bought at Madrid’s El Rastro market—“adds an excessively extravagant touch to the image,” highlighting the direct link between the character’s iconography and the Madrid underground aesthetic of the time (Amaro Martos, 2018, p. 75).

This phenomenon is repeated in later films, where costume emerges as a symbol of cultural and social rupture. For instance, in *¡Átame!* (1990), the director wears a leather duffle coat, fishnet stockings, and earrings created by Cecilia Roth, resulting in “a flamboyant image blending kitsch and performativity” (Amaro Martos, 2018, p. 75).

Amaro Martos also highlights how designers such as Francis Montesinos have played a crucial role in shaping the visual definition of iconic characters. One example is Lucía (Julieta Serrano) in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (1984), who wears “a baby pink and white sixties-style two-piece suit” that “caught the attention of American critic Pauline Kael” (Amaro Martos, 2018, p. 76). Such stylistic choices are far from incidental; they form part of a visual narrative strategy that employs fashion as a vehicle for irony, social critique, and female self-affirmation.

This duality between functionality and symbolism is also present in classical Hollywood cinema, as Pérez-Ruffi points out. In genres such as melodrama, where the psychological characterization of the protagonist is central, costume

becomes particularly significant. It not only communicates the character's social status or gender role but can also anticipate or reflect internal transformations (Pérez-Rufí, 2018, p. 554). For example, shifts in a character's economic or emotional circumstances are often mirrored in their physical appearance and dress. This phenomenon illustrates how costume can function as a silent narrator, capable of conveying psychological and social evolution without the need for explicit dialogue.

As Danny Cruz Pérez notes, these dynamics are especially visible in 1960s cinema, where “the relationship between designer and filmmaker becomes a key narrative tool, endowing the character with an unmistakable visual identity.” In films such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), the iconic black Givenchy dress worn by Audrey Hepburn not only defines the look of Holly Golightly but also becomes a symbol of elegance, female independence, and modernity (Cruz Pérez, 2024, p. 84). Likewise, in *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967), Yves Saint Laurent's designs for Catherine Deneuve help to construct an image of controlled sophistication that contrasts with the protagonist's inner impulses, thereby reinforcing the tension between appearance and desire (Cruz Pérez, 2024, p. 97).

Pérez-Rufí also observes that certain film genres tend to codify costume in stereotypical ways. This occurs, for example, in the western or film noir, where clothing reinforces archetypes easily recognizable to audiences (Pérez-Rufí, 2018, p. 557). However, in other cases—such as the so-called women's pictures—costume becomes a subtle and complex tool for exploring female identity. In these films, the melodramatic heroine shows a particular attention to dress, which is carefully styled as part of her representation and narrative development (Pérez-Rufí, 2018, p. 554).

Taken together, these studies confirm that costume responds not only to aesthetic or practical concerns but also constitutes a system of signs that actively contributes to audiovisual narrative construction. Whether through the social coding of appearance, the communication of psychological traits, or the symbolic transformation of characters, costume emerges as a fully functional visual discourse within the cinematic universe.

5. Analysis

Costume design in *Volver* transcends its decorative function to become a system of signs that articulates identity, memory, and dramatic structure. This strategy aligns with a recurring pattern in Almodóvar's filmography, where genre blending, intertextuality, and the subversion of social norms converge to produce a distinctive cinematic discourse. As Acevedo-Muñoz (2007, pp. 84–85) notes, the Manchegan director employs memory, the body, and identity as central axes for reflecting on post-Franco Spain, combining melodramatic elements with a transgressive gaze. In *Volver*, costume design not only denaturalizes cultural clichés, but also creates a visually symbolic universe that dissolves boundaries between the marginal and the central, the sacred and the profane, the real and the performative.

Casetti and Di Chio (1990, p. 21) argue that film analysis should focus on the construction of the cinematic text as “a unified, delimited, and communicative linguistic object.” Applying this framework to the costumes in *Volver*, one can observe that the characters' garments are not a mere accumulation of clothing items, but rather a functional structure in which each element contributes to a narrative system. No detail functions in isolation; each is understood in relation to others—an element may result from another, precede another, or serve as its opposite or complement—thus forming an interconnected network of meaning (Casetti & Di Chio, 1990, p. 37).

Volver constructs a rural iconography in which coarse fabrics and earthy colours are not mere scenic embellishments, but markers of a matriarchal Manchegan identity. As Sánchez-Alarcón (2008, p. 335) observes, costume design in Almodóvar's cinema not only defines the characters' personalities but also engages in a dialogue with the iconography of Spanish popular culture. A notable example of this function is the headscarf worn by Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) in the opening scene, as she cleans her parents' grave (F2). The floral scarf—a design featuring red and yellow motifs on a white background, typical of Manchegan craftsmanship—not only shields her from La Mancha's arid wind but also serves as a symbol of her cultural rootedness. Unlike the urban attire she wears in Madrid (such as tight-fitting blouses and dark skirts), the scarf,

tied under her chin, evokes the tradition of rural Spanish women who, across generations, have worn such garments for funerals and agricultural labour.

In this context, the headscarf functions as a sign imbued with memory and belonging, and can be interpreted as a “magical object” in the sense defined by Propp: a material element that activates an emotional dimension of the narrative, linking the protagonist to her past and to the affective network that structures the story. More than a mere accessory, this garment transcends its practical purpose to condense memory and belonging, offering a revalorization of the rural without resorting to stereotypical representations of backwardness.



F2. Raimunda wearing a floral headscarf. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.

Similarly, another element of Raimunda's costume reinforces the connection between the corporeal and the symbolic, enhancing the emotional weight through her everyday attire. According to the film's costume designer, Daigeler, “Almodóvar insisted that Raimunda's red apron should look worn, almost like a second skin, to reflect her connection to hard labour and spilled blood. Red was not merely a colour, but a metaphor for her resilience” (F3). Daigeler also notes that he wanted the character to be inspired by Sophia Loren and her sensuality, so that, although Raimunda is a woman marked by pain, she should also embody strength and beauty (F4). This metaphor of costume as a “second skin” reinforces Barthes' (1967/2022, p. 88) ideas regarding the intertwining of clothing and subjectivity, as the dressed body not only expresses identity but also contributes to the narrative construction of the character.



F3. Raimunda wearing a red apron. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.



F4. Raimunda embodying her characteristic style. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.

The costume of the character Irene, played by Carmen Maura (F5) — her loose cotton dress, the housecoat worn over it, and her knitted cardigan — was designed to avoid folkloric stereotypes while maintaining a recognizable cultural connection (Ferrero & Megía, April 14, 2021). These rural women's garments not only signify a form of rural 'Spanishness' but also engage in a dialogue with the imaginary that Almodóvar reinterprets through an affective lens. Likewise, Agustina, portrayed by Blanca Portillo, a neighbour of similar age to Raimunda, also dresses as a rural woman, reinforcing the social and cultural fabric that underpins the film (F6).



F5. Irene in blue-grey toned costume. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo



F6. Agustina in traditional village attire, visually distinct from Raimunda and Sole. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.

Colour also plays a key role in the symbolic and emotional system underpinning the analysis of *Volver*. After introducing Raimunda, Irene, and Agustina, it becomes clear how each chromatic palette contributes to the construction of their identity and emotional state. Raimunda's wardrobe — which shifts from dark tones to a warmer and more luminous palette — can be interpreted as a visual expression of her internal process of resilience, transformation, and emotional reconstruction, conveying energy and desire.

In contrast, the cool colours worn by Irene were intended to give her an ethereal, almost ghostly presence. Finally, Agustina's palette of earthy tones connects directly to her rural identity and her roots in La Mancha. This use of colour aligns with Allinson's (2001, p. 16) observation that Almodóvar

reinterprets cultural stereotypes to imbue them with new layers of meaning, allowing tonalities to define the characters while also expressing the emotions and cultural codes that shape them.

Within this same framework of symbolic construction, the use of kitsch also plays a prominent role. One explicit example appears in the scene featuring a trash TV program, where the host wears a blouse adorned with an oversized flower, functioning as a visual parody and a direct critique of the media's sensationalization of other people's suffering (F7). This scene resonates with Vernon and Morris's (1995, p. 103) insights on kitsch as a symbolic strategy in shaping post-Franco Spanish identity, and it reinforces the ironic distance Almodóvar establishes between popular aesthetics and hegemonic audiovisual discourse.



F7. Television presenter. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.

A crucial contribution of Aesthetics of Film is the notion of “secondary identification,” whereby “the spectator identifies with the subject of vision, with the eye of the camera that has seen before them” (Aumont et al., 1996, p. 93). Aumont (1996) also distinguishes between the “general aesthetics” of cinema as an art form and the “technical practice” that makes it possible (p. 120). In *Volver*, this dynamic is evident in the scene where Raimunda prepares to host the party organized for the film crew (F8). The use of a slip (undergarment) not only evokes a retro and sensual aesthetic, but also reveals her transformation process, foreshadowing her active role in the forthcoming event.



F8. Raimunda preparing for the celebration. Film frame from *Volver* (2006), directed by Pedro Almodóvar. © El Deseo.

The findings clearly confirm that costume design in *Volver* (2006) functions as a visual narrative language that allows viewers to follow Raimunda's emotional evolution without needing to reiterate the theoretical framework previously discussed. In particular, the chromatic coding highlights the use of red—present in the apron and several of the protagonist's dresses—which transcends its aesthetic role to become a symbol of empowerment and resilience. In key scenes, such as the rehearsal of the play in the backyard, the intensity of the red accompanies each decisive gesture made by Raimunda, underlining her shift from domestic routine to conscious and determined action. This symbolic use of color aligns with Allinson's view that "Almodóvar has attracted international attention precisely because of his ability to recontextualize cultural and national stereotypes, imbuing them with new layers of meaning" (2001, p. 210).

Considering costume as a marker of identity, one can observe an evolution that enhances Raimunda's connection with her familial heritage. Far from being a mere accessory, this transition functions as an emotional bridge that facilitates the character's reconciliation with her past. Pérez-Rufí (2018) links this phenomenon to "the narrative function of costume in classical cinema, where clothing communicates both social strata and internal transformations" (p. 547). Similarly, Danny Cruz Pérez emphasizes that "fashion in film not only defines the character but also establishes a dialogue between past and present" (2024, p. 84), thus reinforcing the close relationship between costume and cultural memory in Almodóvar's work.

Regarding the performative dimension, the red apron, more than a utilitarian accessory, becomes a key device in constructing Raimunda's female agency. Each shot in which she adjusts the apron in front of the mirror underscores her process of self-assertion and anticipates her personal evolution, in line with Entwistle's (2000) notion of the "dress-act."

In terms of reception and spectatorship, by projecting scenes of costume transformation through alternating montage with close-ups of Raimunda's face, Almodóvar generates a mechanism of intense empathy. In this way, the audience reads the costume not only as an index of character, but as an active participant in the narrative tension. This phenomenon aligns with Metz's idea that "the spectator identifies with the subject of vision, with the eye of the camera that has seen before them" (2006, p. 505). Likewise, Bordwell and Thompson note that montage is a "device that organizes the flow of images to produce effects of meaning" (2010, p. 112).

About the spatial and relational dimension, the contrast between Madrid and the rural village strengthens the narrative dynamic that involves costume design. As Aumont et al. (1996) point out, "filmic space is not a reproduction of reality, but a perceptual construction that organizes the diegetic world to guide the spectator's interpretation" (p. 89). This perspective is complemented by Casetti and Di Chio's view that "every element of the text must be read as an integral part of a whole: for example, X as a consequence of Y and a precursor to Z, or X as opposed to Y and complementary to Z, and so on" (1990, p. 37). In *Volver*, Raimunda's costume does not function in isolation, but rather in relation to space, colour, and editing, creating a complex web of meanings that connects the visual to the narrative.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that costume design in *Volver* transcends mere adornment, emerging as a fundamental narrative device that enhances both character identity and emotional development. Through the careful use of colour, texture, and style, Almodóvar constructs a visual language that conveys key information about the plot, operating as a semiotic code that articulates the

characters' inner transformations as well as their connections to their environment.

From an aesthetic perspective, colour plays a central role in the filmmaker's narrative strategy. Sánchez-Alarcón observes that red is a predominant element during moments of pain and passion in Almodóvar's filmography, functioning as a vehicle of emotional intensity and symbolic weight. In *Volver*, this colour becomes a distinctive signifier for Raimunda, reinforcing her vital energy and resilience. This chromatic load is inscribed in what Sánchez-Alarcón defines as "surrealist naturalism" (2008, p. 329), a style in which the everyday is stylized without losing its grounding in reality. Thus, costume design not only defines the characters' personalities but also engages in a dialogue with the iconography of Spanish popular culture, re-signifying it in each film (2008, p. 335). In this context, the headscarf Raimunda wears (F2) at the beginning of the film—during the ritual cleaning of her parents' grave on All Souls' Day—symbolizes her emotional bond with her roots. While her overall attire reflects her urban life, this accessory connects her with the women of the village, who also wear headscarves during the ceremony. In this way, the scarf transcends its practical function and becomes an emotional marker that revalorizes rural identity, avoiding its reduction to a symbol of backwardness.

In particular, the clothing choices of Raimunda, Irene, and Agustina not only reflect their personalities but also signal their internal transformations and their relationships with their surrounding environment. Costume thus emerges as a mode of cinematic expression equivalent to visual dialogue, adding nuance to the narrative and deepening the viewer's understanding of the characters.

This analysis reaffirms the significance of costume as a narrative tool in auteur cinema and offers an interdisciplinary methodological framework applicable to other directors. In *Volver*, costume design consolidates the director's visual universe, challenges stereotypes of rural Spain, and reclaims cultural identity through clothing.

Ultimately, costume in *Volver* operates as a visual code that reinforces narrative structure, character identity, and cultural representation, opening new avenues for understanding the impact of fashion in Almodóvar's cinema. This

methodological self-awareness aims to balance the conclusions without diminishing the validity of the findings. Taken as a whole, this study contends that in *Volver*, clothing does not merely cover bodies—it tells stories. On the surface of the fabric, a narrative of grief, returns, and emancipation is woven—one that transcends the screen.

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